

The National Cancer Institute Cancer Centers Program

The National Cancer Institute Cancer Centers Program supports 60 NCI-designated cancer centers nationwide that are actively engaged in transdisciplinary research to reduce cancer incidence, morbidity, and mortality. Although a few centers existed in the late 1960s, the National Cancer Act of 1971 authorized the formal establishment of the Cancer Centers Program. The Act also dramatically transformed the centers' structure and broadened the scope of their mission to include all aspects of laboratory-based; clinical; and prevention, control, and population based research. Over the last three decades, the program has grown steadily and cancer centers have been established in a number of different organizational settings, including free-standing independent institutions dedicated entirely to cancer research and matrix centers within academic institutions. Some centers are comprised of a consortium of several institutions.

The mechanism of support for an NCI-designated cancer center is the Cancer Center Support Grant (CCSG), which is also sometimes referred to as a P30 or core grant. The CCSG serves as a focal point for facilitating transdisciplinary research within the institution for developing new, innovative approaches in cancer research. The grant is intended to provide research infrastructure and provides partial salary support for senior staff of the center and leaders of transdisciplinary research programs. It also supports administrative and development functions in keeping with the goals of the cancer center and shared resources and services that support its science. Research projects themselves are supported through competitively peer-reviewed grants and contracts. To be eligible to apply for a CCSG, the applicant institution must have a significant base of such individually funded cancer research projects.

To obtain a CCSG an institution must submit an application to the NCI. The application is assessed by panels of reviewers comprised of peers of the applicant. The peer review panel evaluates the scientific merit of the application and the extent to which the proposed cancer center has promoted and/or is likely to promote excellence in cancer research. The review is rigorous and the CCSG is awarded only in cases where the merit of the application is high. Those institutions that have been awarded a CCSG are considered to be NCI-designated cancer centers.

As of 2004, there are 60 NCI-designated cancer centers. Of these, 38 are comprehensive cancer centers and 22 are cancer centers. The unmodified term **cancer center** refers to a cancer center having a scientific agenda that is primarily focused on basic, population sciences, or clinical research --or any two of the three components. Such centers are encouraged to stimulate transdisciplinary research. All areas of research should be linked collaboratively. Cancer centers with clinical components are expected to conduct early phase, innovative clinical trials and to participate in the NCI cooperative groups. A **comprehensive cancer center** has reasonable depth and breadth of research activities in each of three major areas: laboratory, clinical, and population-based research, with substantial transdisciplinary research that bridges these scientific areas. It is expected to initiate and conduct early phase, innovative clinical trials and to participate in the NCI's cooperative groups by providing leadership and accruing patients to trials. It is also required to demonstrate professional and public education, and dissemination of clinical and public health advances into the community it serves.

Together, the 60 NCI-designated Cancer Centers supported by the NCI continue to work toward creating new and innovative approaches to cancer research and through transdisciplinary efforts, to effectively move this research from the laboratory into clinical and community settings.